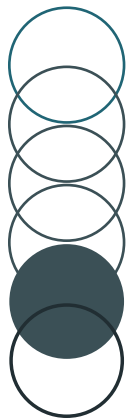


STUDY GUIDE

# Effective Ministry to Kids and Youth in Foster Care



## Unit 4: Helping Kids In Foster Care Succeed At Church

Create a supportive ministry environment for all kids.



## 1. Use child-centered language.

- When serving children in foster care, separate each child's identity from their circumstances.
- Instead of saying, "Lucas is a foster kid" or referring to him as "the foster kid," try saying, "This is Lucas. He is visiting today."

If ministry staff need to know that Lucas is in foster care, someone can privately share that pertinent information. As you do, lead by example and be mindful of the words you use.

## 2. Set appropriate learning goals.

- Children in foster care represent a wide range of prior knowledge and cognitive abilities, and they can't learn at church if the lessons are too easy or too difficult for them.
- Just because a child has behavioral problems or learning gaps doesn't mean that they are less intelligent or less capable of challenging work.
- We must also be prepared to recognize and assist children who have learning gaps and cognitive deficits.

### 3. Meet individual needs.

- The goal of the ministry is to build connections and share the love of Jesus in ways that are most accessible to each child.
- Some children may need to “opt out” of the standard ministry program when it isn’t meeting their needs.
- It is important to be flexible, so consider alternate activities when necessary, and be open to ministering to children in other locations, such as outside the room or on the playground.

### 4. Empower the child.

- Children in foster care often experience a profound sense of powerlessness, worthlessness, and incompetence.
- Empower children in foster care to advocate for themselves, express their thoughts and feelings, and actively participate in decisions related to their spiritual growth and wellbeing.
  - What activity to do during playtime
  - How they respond in worship
  - How they serve in the church

Kids in foster care may be feeling sad about their current placement or missing their bio family, so playing a game or singing a silly song may be way outside their comfort zone. This can be an opportunity for a leader to talk with the child one-on-one in a safe, visible location. This shows them that they are known and loved by us and by God.

- **Encourage children in foster care to get involved in activities, leadership roles, and service opportunities.**
  - Peer mentoring
  - Leading youth group discussions
  - Participating in community service projects
- **When we empower children, it builds their confidence, increases their buy-in in the ministry, and strengthens their resilience.**

## **5. Acknowledge and include.**

- **Many children in foster care feel unwanted and excluded, making them very sensitive to perceived rejection.**
- **If they don't get "picked" for something, they might become upset and cry.**
- **This does not mean that need to pick them every time, but we should find ways to acknowledge them and include them as much as possible.**
  - Passing out items in class
  - Picking up the prayer requests others have written
  - Serving as a "buddy" to a younger child

## 6. Address sensory needs.

- Many children in foster care experience sensory processing challenges and are easily overwhelmed by loud noises and chaotic environments.
- Make sure there is a safe, quiet space available for children who need a break and let them know when and how to access it.
- Consider having hearing protection on hand for those who are particularly sensitive to noise.

## 7. Don't take behavior personally.

- Working with children who have severe behaviors can be emotionally challenging for the adult.
- Before entering the ministry space, make sure you are prepared emotionally and spiritually so that you can respond in a healthy way to challenging behaviors.
- When a child is defiant or disrespectful, remind yourself that “this isn't about me” and dig beneath the behavior to discover a need the child may have.

## 8. Be prepared for intense disclosures.

- Sometimes children will decide to share sensitive or “mature” information during private conversations or even in group settings.
- Determine when and how you will discreetly pull that child aside to discuss their situation privately.
- Be familiar with the policies and procedures related to reporting abuse.
- Develop a plan for supporting the other children who may have overheard a shocking or upsetting disclosure.

## 9. Maintain predictability.

- Children in foster care frequently encounter unexpected changes and severe disruptions to their lives.
- To help them feel safe, maintain a predictable schedule, post a written itinerary, and let first-time visitors know what to expect ahead of time.
- Warn children of any anticipated changes to the ministry, such as planned vacations, staffing changes, or even physical changes to the ministry space.

## 10. Anticipate potential triggers.

Certain topics, words, or phrases may be particularly triggering for kids in foster care

- **Parents / family**
  - Don't assume all children have loving families.
  - Say, "Ben, your people are here," instead of, "Ben, your parents are here."
- **Sexual purity / premarital sex**
  - Many kids in foster care have been raped or molested.
  - Emphasizing the importance of sexual purity can trigger feelings of guilt, shame, and hopelessness.
- **Child abuse / neglect**
  - Children may have a strong emotional reaction when a conversation reminds them of abuse they themselves have experienced.
  - Some children who have experienced abuse haven't yet realized their experience was abusive, and this realization could elicit intense emotions.
- **Gender identity / sexual orientation**
  - When discussing these topics, consider the possibility that kids in your group are struggling with their own sexual or gender identity.
  - It is possible to remain faithful to the doctrine of your church while maintaining a supportive and accepting posture toward the person.

- **Suicide / self-harm / eating disorders**
  - There are almost certainly young people in your group who have struggled in the past or who are currently struggling with these challenges.
  - Regardless of a child’s foster care status, it is important to privately follow up in a supportive, non-judgmental way whenever a child has a strong emotional reaction to these topics.

## Discussion Questions

- ① How has your awareness of the language used to describe children in foster care evolved during this course? Can you recall a time when you witnessed someone unintentionally using language that may have been hurtful or stigmatizing?

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- ② If you have a teaching role in the church, how do you currently assess and adjust the difficulty of lessons to ensure they are appropriate for all children, including those with diverse backgrounds and experiences?

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- 3 Have you ever encountered a situation where a child’s needs were not being met within your church ministry? How did you respond, and what did you learn from that experience about the importance of flexibility and individualized support?

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- 4 Consider your interactions with children in your church community. How do you currently ensure that all children, especially those who may feel excluded or unwanted, feel acknowledged and included in church activities and discussions?

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- 5 Think about a recent interaction with a child who exhibited challenging behavior. How did you initially respond, and how might your approach have been influenced by taking a moment to consider the underlying needs driving the behavior?

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- 6 Reflect on the level of consistency and predictability within your church ministry. In what ways do you currently communicate schedules and changes to children, and how might you improve in ensuring a more predictable environment for them?

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# 1. The Workshop

Take your team’s trauma competency to the next level with the **Reach Hurting Kids Workshop**. With this evidence-based, self-guided curriculum, you can train your *own* staff and volunteers to reach the hurting kids in your congregation and community!

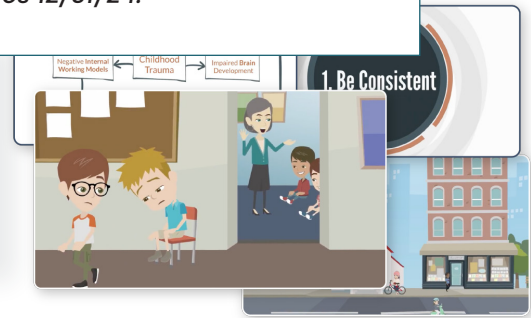
[reachhurtingkids.com/workshop](https://reachhurtingkids.com/workshop)



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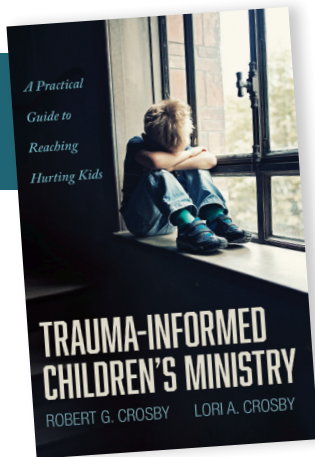
Use promo code **FOSTER10** to receive a **10% discount** on all workshop modules.

*Expires 12/31/24.*



# 2. The Book

**Trauma-Informed Children’s Ministry: A Practical Guide to Reaching Hurting Kids** is the culmination of ten years of children’s ministry research. Written by research psychologist Dr. Robert Crosby and play therapist Lori Crosby, this easy-to-read book is full of real-world stories and practical strategies for ministering to kids who have experienced trauma.



# 3. The Website

To learn more about Reach Hurting Kids Institute, visit [reachhurtingkids.com](https://reachhurtingkids.com)

**Connect with our partners:**

**Pastor Kim Botto**  
kimbotto.com

**Dr. Danisha Keating**  
danishakeating.com

**Resound Trauma Education**  
resoundtraumaeducation.org